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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Sex Education in Chinese Families with Teenager from the Perspective of Satir's Iceberg Theory

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**ABSTRACT**

Nowadays, the development of the Internet makes it easy for Chinese teenagers to know something about sex. And teenagers begin to be curious and concerned about sexual detail because of physiological maturation in adolescence. However, sex education is a sensitive area for some parents, so that Chinese parents often interrupt or accuse teenagers when they have some issues about sex. The late data shows that when parents responded by avoiding the question about sex in families, the teenager will have a negative attitude toward sex. The purpose of this study that makes Chinese parents realize the importance of sex education in families first. In addition, Chinese parents need to actively change their ways and to conduct systematic and scientific sex education for children in families. It will be so helpful that teenagers can grow up healthily. The pertinent literature was collected and analyzed in the electronic database, so we think about sex education in Chinese families today based on the theory of Satir's Iceberg. Therefore, parents that have children in adolescence should transform their views and coping styles so that real sexual values will be sent to teenagers in a healthy way.

**KEYWORDS**

Teenagers; Sex education; Family sex education; Satir; Coping style

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### 1. Introduction

Influenced by historical factors and traditional concepts, Chinese parents tend to interrupt or criticize their children when teenagers ask them about sexual things. According to the analysis of Satir's Iceberg theory, this coping style makes teenagers feel shame about sex, and they will avoid sex education. Sexual information through unhealthy websites on the Internet is harmful. Eventually, it may lead children to have incorrect sexual values. Worst of all, sexual behaviour in danger can increase the possibility of having sexually transmitted diseases and illegal crimes. So, this paper will remind parents to think about their own way in the family, and analyse the impact of different coping styles, so that people can realize it is good for children that parents respond to sexual problems in a scientific way. And parents can teach their children about sex and gender in better ways.

### 2. The Importance of Family Sexual Education

The physical and mental changes during puberty are dramatic. Teenagers pay more attention to their own bodies because of the maturity of sexual organs, and they are curious about the physical development of gender differences. "Adolescence" is the best golden period of life. The World Health Organization defines it as 10-20 years old. It is a transition period gradually from children to adults. As for human beings, adolescence is the second peak of growth and development. In fact, it is a critical period for teenagers to develop their cognition, emotion, attitude and values. Teenagers began to have their own ideas of sexuality and gender, but it is still immature and unclear in this period.

On a worldwide scale, the age of sexual maturity has advanced at this time. Based on statistical data from the World Health Organization, the average age of menstruation for European females is 16-17 years old in the middle of the nineteenth century. Until the middle of the 20th century, by contrast, the age is advanced to 12-13 years old in Europe. For girls in America and Japan, the age of sexual maturity is also significantly advanced within fifty years (Special Planning in the Era of Reading Pictures, 2002). This trend has an impact on psychology, especially for teenagers. It is necessary to receive sex education for this reason.

When a boy experiences his first spermatorrhoea, or a girl has menstruation for the first time, facing these problems, they feel confused and nervous. As parents are the persons children rely on before they become adults, it is important and influential that parents' attitudes and coping styles when it comes to questions about sexuality. When children are living in pleasant surroundings, it's easier for them to talk about their own matters, and their adolescence can be passed more smoothly. On the contrary, teenagers will feel ashamed if their parents accuse them. It leads to negative effects on the mental health of teenagers.

Parents are the main source for teenagers to accept the sexual view, which is the knowledge of gender roles, sex behaviour, social relationship between males and females in law, and other content. Knowledge and skill need to be taught; otherwise, teenagers have faulty attitudes about sex by mistake when they become adults. Sexual behaviour is just a part of sex education, and, more importantly, building respectful relationships with others, helping teenagers to think about how their choices affect the happiness of all people they care about, including themselves, and to take responsibility for their life. Parents, as people trusted by their children, need to teach their children something about sexuality in the right way and to convey ideas of gender equality so that teenagers can do through puberty and face life better.

### **3. The Actuality of Sex Education in Chinese Family**

It is normal to have desires to explore things that we do not know. To protect the rights of young people, sex education is essential and comprehensive before they received false information. Although some parents are aware of the importance of sex education, 90% of Chinese parents do not spend their time in sex education in families (Zhang et al., 2020).

A lot of people misunderstand the content of sex education, and parents can't find a way to get the positive effects of sex education (Li et al., 2022). In the investigation, many parents learn knowledge by self-study through different information channels so that they can't give correct and systematic sexuality education to their kids. Comprehensive sexuality education included many sides; the part of the gender stereotype and bullying in school isn't followed with interest. In the process of communication between parents and kids, most of the topics revolved around the standards of gender interaction and emotional issues. In Chinese families, they seldom discuss sensitive problems such as contraception, abortion and sexual assault. And the proportion of such topics is much lower than that of foreign families in comparison with foreign sex education surveys (Zuo et al., 2013).

Besides, most of them don't sure when or how to start sex education. Nearly 40% of parents think that sex education starts from the senior grade of primary school, even junior high school. In reality, it is so important that having sex education in the family after the baby was born for building children's reactions to body, gender and sex. And some parents are feared of teaching kids sexual information by mistake; it is hard for parents to discuss sexual topics with children on their own initiative.

Chinese parents only respond when asked about sex and gender, and they don't want to communicate with their children forwardly (Ma, 2016). If teenagers were ashamed of themselves for talking about sex with their parents, their father or mother does not have the opportunity to tell them that they should take care of physical and mental problems caused by sexual things. As a new type of mass media, the Internet is not only used for entertainment but also for learning. There is a lot of information without a scientific basis on the website. It is difficult for teenagers to distinguish right from wrong. If parents don't stop it in time, teenagers will have incorrect emotional concepts. However, parents can't keep an eye on their children all the time. Sex education at home is a better choice.

Generally speaking, young people were willing to discuss with parents of the same nature, and the father was rarely involved in family sex education. Missing the father's perspective, it is biased education about sex and gender for teenagers. Besides that, adolescents only meet the social expectations which are corresponding to their physical gender, and it is not helpful for their life. A person who has both masculinity and femininity can handle the relationship better. It is not recommended that parents limit the development of teenagers because of gender.

Only half of Chinese parents are satisfied with teenagers that answered questions in their mode. The rest of the patterns responded by making short shrift of matters, fudging the issue, avoiding questions or having limited ability to answer (Zuo et al., 2013). Clearly, parents are short of basic communication skills in talking with adolescents about sex, and they can't teach the knowledge of sex, which scientific to their kids mostly. If there is a conflict or a fight in the family because of sexual issues, adolescents without family

support are more likely to act impulsively and recklessly, which has a negative impact on their physical and mental health (Zuo et al., 2007). In fact, teenager who receives sex education in the right way do not have sex behaviour at an early age.

Obviously, a lot of Chinese parents still can't take the first step to discuss sex-related topics with their children directly and scientifically in the family. Firstly, parents don't have enough knowledge about sex and gender. Secondly, they think that sexual education is the only sexual behaviour, and they don't want children to know about it early. The last, influenced by China's ancient thoughts, when parents talk about sex, parents feel uncomfortable when they talk about sex. However, sex education in the family cannot wait any longer. It has a great influence on kids to face gender and the problems of reproductive health and sexual, mental health, even making decisions in the future that parents' coping style towards sex-related issues and the level of knowledge when they want to start sex education (Tu et al., 2005).

#### **4. An Analysis of the Coping Style of Chinese Parents Respond to Sex Education**

##### **4.1 Historical Factors and Traditional Concepts**

Men and women are different due to their physiological characteristics. Before the secondary sexual characteristics of adolescence are fully developed, children's sex education, such as boys going to the men's toilet and girls going to the women's toilet, is, in fact, the basic content of sex education. With the growth of age, the maturity of the body makes primitive gender differences become more apparent, and the social concepts behind the physical signs are also gradually emerging as young people begin to have self-consciousness to perceive and think about the deeper meaning behind gender.

In ancient China, traditional society treated men and women in different ways from an early age, giving the boys a guide to become symbols of strength and power, and advocated women's weakness as beauty. In family education, the division of labour and the relationship between parents implied and conveyed to their children the gender relationship of "men are superior to women" and the patriarchal feudal social ideology (Zhang, 2014).

As a result of traditional attitudes, nearly 80% of parents in modern society still disapprove of boys and girls attending classes together when it comes to sex education in school. However, the fact is that sex education that both boys and girls need to receive should be in the same space regardless of school or family. It is only when young people understand the physical structure of the two sexes that they will be considerate of the situation each other and build up the values of equality and respect. The separated education cannot dispel perplexity and curiosity but can only deepen prejudice and discrimination between men and women (Li et al., 2022).

The concept of explicit sex education did not exist in China before modern times, and because the thought of the confinement ideology of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty had been full of the whole society, official attitudes towards sex during the Song, Ming and Qing Dynasties were extremely conservative, and the people mostly communicated by calligraphy, painting and word of mouth. The sex-related fertility issue was a topic that could not be avoided in the family; as a result, family education became the main channel for the transmission of sex-related content in ancient times, but the purpose of this sexual topic was only to reproduce, and the desire of the human being itself was suppressed and ignored (Zhang, 2014).

Although the new-style schools opened in modern times included lessons in physiological and health related to the structure of the body, the long-term taboo created a sense of inertia, and talking openly about sex was still a "risky" behaviour (Zhang, 2014). Until now, it is common for Chinese parents to avoid replying or respond vaguely to their teenagers' confusion when they are confronted with questions from teenagers about sex, which makes it difficult for teenagers to find the answers they want to know at home.

##### **4.2 Impact of Parental Coping Styles**

Virginia Satir metaphors man's "self" as an iceberg. It can be seen that part of it is man's behaviour or coping style (including being agreeable, accusation, super-intelligence, interruption and agreement between the outside and the inside), while what is hidden under the water and hard to perceive is the "inner" that has been ignored and unnoticed by us for a long time, which includes feelings, views, expectations, desires and ourselves (Li & Tian, 2021).

Satir's iceberg theory advocates people to explore different levels of self and finally transforms hidden feelings, views, expectations and desires into positive life energy. The iceberg theory is widely used in different fields. For example, when iceberg theory applies to enterprises, it is beneficial to the harmony of interpersonal relationships and the smooth development of work activities. What's more, applying it to family education can help parents understand their children's inner world and behaviour patterns, thus promoting communication between parents and children, guiding children to establish correct values and helping them grow up healthily.



Figure 1. Satir's iceberg theory diagram  
 Source: Danni made it on the chuangkit.com.

With the help of Satir's iceberg theory, we can know that children gradually develop a kind of curiosity and desire for sex in their physical development. This curiosity leads them to have a desire to be accepted and approved by their parents and an expectation to be understood by them and to have their curiosity satisfied. Influenced by traditional ideas, parents may feel shy, embarrassed or ashamed when confronted with children's questions or talking about sex-related topics. This feeling may lead them to interrupt, criticize or respond in a hyper-rational manner, which may then manifest itself in a way that inhibits sexual conversations, refutes and scolds their children.

Parents' response when teenagers ask questions about sexual things.

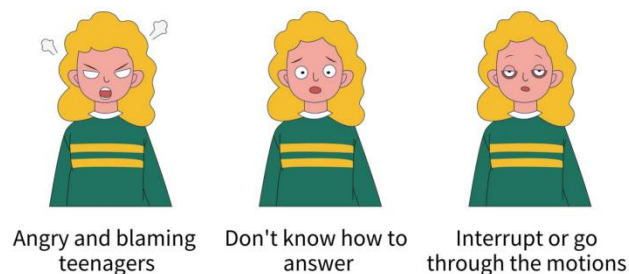


Figure 2 Parents' coping style  
 Source: Danni made it on the chuangkit.com.

This kind of misguided coping style of parents will make children's expectations fall short and create the perception that this behaviour is not allowed and is incorrect. This kind of negative response to the topic of sex will send a signal to the young person that "sex is a topic that cannot be communicated" and "sex is wrong", and the accused children will think that it is their asking the wrong question that is offensive to their parents, thus resulting in feelings of shame, fear and guilt. And when they can't control their curiosity to reach out, they will self-criticize themselves, believing that they are doing something incorrect and immoral, and then, in turn, suppress themselves. Even when they grow up, they will be unable to be open to sexuality in relationships and can't accept sexual behaviour in love as adults.

At the same time, most young people who do not receive answers from their parents will often explore other ways on their own. The messages that they receive are complex and difficult to discern or even come into contact with pornography. The gender relationship that is implied in pornography is far removed from the concept conveyed by systematic and scientific sex education, which is not conducive to the development of emotional relationships in adulthood among teenagers.

The coping styles and attitudes parents respond to will affect children's cognition at the iceberg level, and incorrect communication methods can even hinder the physical and mental development of young people. Therefore, parents need to learn more information to shift their preconceived views, overcome negative emotions, learn healthy ways of sex education so that hidden feelings, views, expectations and aspirations can be transformed into positive life energy to pass on to their children. Parents need to be proactive in understanding their children's inner world, building a harmonious parent-child relationship and guiding them in a timely manner to view sex and intimacy with a scientific perspective so that young people can learn to make happy life choices on their own.



Figure 3 Family sex education  
Source: Baidu (n.d.).

## **5. Countermeasures Based on Satir's Iceberg Theory**

### **5.1 Enhance Parents' Attention to Sex Education**

According to the survey, 25% of Chinese parents feel shy and embarrassed when talking about sex-related issues with their children, which makes it difficult to speak up or even simply avoid ignoring their children's questions. In addition, nearly 50% of parents are not willing to invest time and money in family sex education training and learning (Li et al., 2022), possibly because they believe that they can also improve themselves through self-learning. But what is apparent behind these behaviours is that they have been not yet fully aware of the importance of family sex education for their children. Sex education is beneficial in enabling teenagers to acquire more scientific sexual knowledge, improve their ability to avoid accidental pregnancy or the risk of transmission of infections due to inappropriate sexual behaviour, build healthier interpersonal relationships with parents and the opposite sex, improve their sense of value and increase pro-social behaviour. At the same time, sex education is also an important means of protection to prevent young people from sexual abuse (Lu & Liu, 2018).

Therefore, parents should increase their recognition of the positive effects of family sex education.

### **5.2 Improve Parents' Knowledge of Sexuality**

The survey found that the vast majority of parents do not have a good knowledge of sex education, which is not conducive to their formation of a correct concept of sex education, and it is also difficult for children to establish equal and respectful sexual values. First of all, their understanding of the content of sex education at home is not comprehensive, and most of them focus on adolescent development, protection of private parts, etc., while neglecting the content of the emotional attachment, gender

equality, sexual intimacy, and the link between sex education and the ability to distinguish information on the Internet, tobacco, alcohol, drugs and violence, etc. Secondly, most parents do not have a good understanding of when to start their child's sex education. Family sex education should be carried out from the birth of the child, which is not only the needs of the child's physical and mental development but also the needs of social and sexual development. In addition, sex education courses carried out by schools do not need to be taught separately by gender, yet only a minority of parents believe that male and female students in a school should take sex education courses together. Separate education is not conducive to the development of correct and equal gender values in children. Parents can improve their sexual knowledge level by participating in the training and lectures of sex education courses or seminars held by various formal social organizations (Li et al., 2022), learning about the positive impact of scientific sex education, changing traditional views, and understanding sex education without prejudice.

### **5.3 Parents Need to Overcome Psychological "Barriers."**

Most parents always feel shy and embarrassed when talking about sex, or feel uncomfortable about sex because of historical factors, or worry that their answers will make children prematurely exposed to sex-related content, distract children's attention, and interfere with their normal learning (Herzig van Wees et al., 2021). However, if parents do not guide them properly, the probability of adolescents turning to seek some undesirable sources to obtain sexual knowledge due to strong curiosity will increase. Therefore, in order to prevent young people from being disturbed by bad information, parents need to recognize the importance of their own sex education for their children and change their own coping styles so that they can overcome their discomfort in their hearts and carry out family sex education in a timely and active manner. When children ask their parents questions about their sexuality, parents must be responsive, answer all questions and actively answer them using the language they can understand according to their children's age and cognitive level, and become their enlightenment teachers of sex education for their children (Liu, 2016).

### **5.4 Improve Communication Level and Parent-Child Relationships**

The level of harmony in the relationship between parents and adolescents can have an effect on communication about sex-related topics in the family (Schuster et al., 2006). For example, if the relationship is cold or tense, it will be difficult for parents and children to talk about sex together, parents will find it not easy to carry out sex education, and children may also be more likely to ignore and reject their parents' views; If the relationship is close and the family atmosphere is harmonious, parents are more likely to explain the sex education content to their children easily and effortlessly, children will also be more active in discussing sex with their parents, and may be more willing to accept their parents' views. In addition, a study has shown that it is most beneficial for children to receive sex education when both fathers and mothers are involved in family sex education (Liu & Edwards, 2006). However, in China, fathers play less than 20% of the role in family sex education (Li et al., 2022), and most families have mothers who are responsible for the sex education of their children. The problem of the absence of fathers in family sex education is very serious. Mothers can talk to their daughters about sex, and fathers can also talk to their daughters about sex; similarly, mothers can talk about sex with their sons, and fathers can also talk about sex with their sons (Liu, 2011). Therefore, parents should learn communication skills, improve their communication methods, and use a light, romantic and loving tone of voice to communicate with their children about sex.

## **6. Conclusion**

According to Satir's iceberg theory, the way parents respond to their children's family sex education will indirectly affect their children's sexual values. Based on the current situation of sex education for adolescents in Chinese families, Chinese parents should pay attention to family sex education, actively change their own views and coping styles through strategies such as increasing the level of sexual knowledge, strengthening parent-child relations, improving the way of sex education, and communicating with their adolescents on an equal footing and answer their doubts in a timely manner, Proactively carry out family sex education; At the same time, the legislature and the government should improve the relevant legal system and policy system; All walks of life should actively attach importance to family sex education and study the solutions and products based on China's family sex education problems from different channels; The public should make good use of the Internet media platform to disseminate correct and scientific sex education knowledge and transmit positive and healthy sexual attitudes. China's family sex education needs to unite all forces to support it so that teenagers can establish correct sexual values and learn to protect their rights and interests, and connect themselves, love and vitality to grow healthily.

Last but not least, the advantage of this study is to use Satir's iceberg theory to explain the attitudes and solutions of Chinese parents when facing family sex education and explore the countermeasures to solve the problems of family sex education in China with Satir's family therapy model. However, this research method is mainly based on a literature review and previous research. There is no case study to support the application of the Satir family therapy model to solve family sex education problems. In the future, we hope to have the opportunity to carry out an investigation and practical research on the use of the Satir family therapy model to solve the problems of family sex education and provide more suggestions and thinking for the development and implementation of family sex education in China.

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